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Families' Perceptions and Involvement in School Readiness in Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

The perceptions and attitudes that caregivers have about school readiness influence their behavior on how to prepare their children before entering primary school. However, it was not known how caregivers perceived their role in their children's school readiness in Lao PDR, where there are high repetition and dropout rates in the early years of primary school. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to examine school readiness in the Lao family context. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. From Lao caregivers' perspectives, what does it mean for children to be ready for school?
2. How do Lao caregivers promote school readiness for their child?

To conduct this study, thirty-four caregivers, who experienced preparing their child for the first formal school, participated in eight focus group interviews. The results were classified by three main themes based on three dimensions of school readiness literature. Then, the sub-themes were generated according to the caregivers' discussions as follows: (1) Ready Children, which stresses that children are ready for school when they are physically ready, social-emotionally ready and cognitively ready; (2) Ready School, which illustrates the mismatch between caregivers' expectations and

school readiness in which caregivers understand school readiness is influenced by teachers and the school but not by themselves; and (3) Ready Family, which shows different groups of caregivers have different levels of involvement in daily routines with their children.

Findings from this study can be used as a reference to teachers, early childhood professionals and policymakers in Lao PDR to design specific parenting education programs for different groups of caregivers in order to support their understanding about young children's school readiness. Future research is recommended to specifically focus on the perceptions and involvement of teachers, school leaders and policymakers concerning school readiness.

Keyword: School readiness, caregivers, perception, involvement, kindergarten, Lao families.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Readiness for the first formal schooling experience is something to be concerned for not only children but also their families since it serves as a strong foundation for children's academic achievement. Several studies pointed out the link between being prepared at a young age and life-long success (Duncan et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Therefore, it can be considered absolutely important to prepare children as much as possible for first schooling experiences as they are a crucial first step for their future.

Despite great advancement in this area, the studies are mostly limited to Western countries. In the case of developing countries, there are very few studies concerning the readiness of children at the age of entering primary school, especially in Lao PDR, where high repetition and school dropout rate in early year of elementary school has been known as the greatest problem. By the end of 2015, the country was off-track to meet the Millennium Development Goals, particularly for children in poverty and non-Lao ethnic groups. It could be said that disparity in readiness levels between children from Lao and ethnic minority children is still a major concern, because Lao PDR is a linguistically and ethnically diverse country, with at least 49 distinct

groups and 240 subgroups (Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, 2012). Thus, being fluent in the official language at school can be identified as one of the key factors that affect children's readiness for school. Often, ethnic minority children enter school without kindergarten preparation and then struggle to fit in the school environment.

Overall, preschool children in Lao PDR who are affected by poverty and ethnicity enroll in primary school with insufficient skills which then results in poor educational outcomes; this could later manifest in an early school dropout and repetition. According to Situational Analysis on Student Learning Outcomes in Primary Education in Lao PDR (2015), the enrollment rate of 3- to 5-year-old children was 43.2% in 2014-2015. However, grade 1 drop-out and repetition rate remained at 8.5% and 13.5%, respectively. Considering these challenges shows that education in Lao PDR needs to be improved in order to reduce school retention and ensure a better quality of later life.

In 2012, UNICEF extended the concept of school readiness into three different yet closely related dimensions, which are ready children, ready school and ready family or in other words, it is widely documented that school readiness was a multi-faceted concept which involved all individuals who are related to children's school readiness (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006;

UNICEF, 2012). However, in most discussions about school readiness, the focus is usually on children and school (La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg, 2009), while family is left out as a less influential factor. Thus, the evidence regarding ready family has not yet been examined extensively (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000). On the other hand, Stipek and colleagues emphasized that family is a major influencer in children's lives and that their perceptions of school readiness directly affect how they prepare children to enter school (Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992).

Families' beliefs and attitudes toward education are crucial for the readiness levels for school. For instance, parents' viewpoints on children's education shape their performances of what they should do to prepare their child for school, which in turn, influence later school achievement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Landry & Smith, 2008). When parents recognize the importance of school, they tend to engage in their children's education (Barbarin et al., 2008), make choices over which school their children will attend, and which types of activities to promote optimal outcomes (Bates et al., 1994; Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992).

That being said, readiness disparity may be caused by the characteristics of the family. For example, a study discovered that many children who were assumed to be unready for school were those from

disadvantaged neighborhood (Janus, Walsh, Viverios, Duku, & Offord, 2003). The study also found that poor children often lack stimulations at home through daily routine activities provided by their caregivers (Britto, Fuligni, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Forget-Dubois et al., 2009). Specifically, the economically disadvantaged family may find it difficult to pay for school fee, purchase learning materials and provide other educational opportunities for their children (Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn, & Petrill, 2008) which reduce the level of readiness (White, 1982).

Another characteristic of the ready family is parents' educational background. A previous study implied that parental belief on a child's education was influenced by their own education attainment (Bornstein, Hahn, Suwalsky, & Haynes, 2003). Similarly, a study showed that children's literacy skills were influenced by their parental educational background (Rowe, Denmark, Jones Harden, & Stapleton, 2015). The more parents are involved in literacy activities with their children, the better these children will be able to perform better in literacy, especially in the area of reading (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2015). In other words, parents with high education tend to be more involved in communication and interaction with their child to stimulate literacy development.

Learning activities provided at home by parents, including reading books, singing, playing games (Forget-Dubois et al., 2009) were important for contributing to school readiness for children. Existing research showed that children who are exposed to the variety of activities at home are more likely to advance than their peers who lack the same quantity of involvement (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pianta, Smith, & Reeve, 1991). Moreover, parents' understanding of play and their capacity to create a home learning environment is assumed to be associated with children's positive behavioral outcomes which increased the level of school readiness (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999). Parents can be helpful in terms of preparing children to have expected qualities to smoothly transition to elementary school such as basic academic knowledge and social-emotional skills (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2004). As the main caregivers during the early years, parents have a strong influence on five domains of children development, which are physical health and well-being, literacy and language development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and approach to learning (Kagan, Moore, & Bradekamp, 1995).

Effective understanding of parents' perceptions and involvement on school readiness is not possible without first recognizing the influence of environmental context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Litkowski

(2017), “supporting children’s language and school readiness necessitates understanding their ecological influences by learning about an individual community’s beliefs and practices” (p. 212). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to help answer the research question: How do caregivers perceive school readiness and help their children prepare for school in Lao PDR? The present study takes a step forward to gain an in-depth understanding of how caregivers conceptualize school readiness for their child. The results of this study may provide early childhood policymakers with relevant guidance for parenting education program in order to help families and children where necessary to meet the need of school readiness, which in turn prevent children’s school dropout and retention. Moreover, an understanding of guardians’ views of school readiness may help to clearly define readiness in ways that can benefit all stakeholders who are preparing children for success in the school settings.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the following part, existing literature on school readiness is reviewed. It begins with an overview of school system in Lao PDR. Following this, definition of school readiness and the families' readiness for school are discussed. Finally, the literature relevant to parents' perceptions, involvement and influences on school readiness, and parental promoting school readiness through home literacy environment is reviewed.

1. School System in Lao PDR

Kindergarten or pre-primary schools are the first school experiences for many children in Lao PDR. However, these two types of pre-formal education were different from each other. Kindergartens are traditional preschools that consist of three different levels for children from 3- to 5-year-old. After graduating from kindergartens, children can enroll in formal education (grade1) at the age of 6 or 7 years. On the other hand, pre-primary schools are a new type of pre-formal education established in the areas where kindergartens cannot be well-operated (e.g., remote areas, rural areas, and some suburb areas). Children aged 4 to 5 years attend pre-primary school for only one year to prepare for primary school. At this level, the curriculum to

be taught in classes is a combination of those of kindergarten 3 and grade 1. In other words, the pre-primary school's education equals that of kindergarten 3.

In 2000, primary education was made compulsory for children to start from age 6 which includes five grades (Phommanimith, 2008). After finishing primary school, students can continue studying in lower secondary school for 3 years and another 3 years for upper secondary school. From 2005, the education system has been changed from 11 years to 12 years by adding another year to the lower secondary level (5 years in primary, 4 years in lower secondary and 3 years in upper secondary). Also, the primary and lower-secondary education has been stipulated as compulsory education of Lao PDR (National Assembly, 2015). The education structure, approximate starting ages, and duration can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Education Structure in Lao PDR

Age (years)	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**
Grade				**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**
Pre-formal education				**Primary**					**Lower secondary**				**Upper secondary**		

2. School Readiness

2.1 Definition of School Readiness

Definition of school readiness was first mentioned over 200 years ago, by a Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). However, early childhood educators have had different views on defining school readiness. Some believed that school readiness is a function of a child's maturation, while others presumed readiness as the child's ability to master a specific set of skills. In the past, school readiness was defined by the child's chronological age (Shepard & Smith, 1986), which emphasized on the entrance cutoff as an absolute readiness characteristic. Recently, the view of school readiness has been shifted to the social-constructed concept, which emphasized on the environment that influences children (Murphey & Burns, 2002). In other words, instead of child characteristics, social construction shapes the particular social and physical context to identify the readiness of children.

Together with this notion, researchers in child development fields have been arguing that "school readiness" should be understood in a sociocultural context. According to Li, D'Angiulli, & Kendall (2007), the measures of school readiness can be varied throughout different subgroups,

especially ones with cultural and linguistic diversity, which suggests that readiness is a socially constructed concept. Similarly, Graue (1993) suggested that the best way to understand the local meaning of school readiness is to take a closer look at the community ways of being. She then defined readiness is "better thought of in social and cultural terms; that it is a set of ideas or meanings constructed by people in communities, families, and schools as they participate in the kindergarten experience" (p. 226). Therefore, on the basis of Graue's work, the present study aims to understand the specific meaning of school readiness in Lao context.

Indeed, multiple perceptions of school readiness exist depending on the ones who define them. Kagan characterized "ready to learn" and "ready for school" as different concepts of readiness (Kagan, 1990). The term "ready to learn" was defined as the child's characteristics from birth which emphasized that children in any age group are able to learn specific concepts before entering school. In contrast, "readiness for school" is a notion when children were expected to acquire some basic knowledge and competencies, such as following directions, identifying letters, numbers, and knowing how to spell their names, which are needed for starting school, thereby, they can adapt to the new learning environment (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

School readiness also referred to children's acquisition of specific skills needed to function in a formal learning environment. Previous studies mostly emphasized the importance of cognitive and social skills for children to enter school (Davies, Janus, Duku, & Gaskin, 2016; Duncan et al., 2007; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). Specifically, children's school readiness are classified into five domains including 1) physical health and well-being, which consist of gross and fine motor skills, children's health and nutrition; 2) literacy and language development, involving the ability of children to read, write, understand the concept of print and communicate with others; 3) cognitive development, which refers to strategies that children use to learn and remember including the ability to understand how to count objects, compare things and make predictions; 4) social and emotional development, which is the ability of children to regulate their own emotion as well as the ability to make a good relationship with others; and 5) approach to learning, which refers to the adaptive learning behavior such as children's initiative, curiously, reasoning and problem solving in completing tasks (Doherty, 1997; Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1998; La Paro & Pianta, 2000).

The most recent concept of school readiness further extended by drawing three different dimensions (UNICEF, 2012). As previously stated, the first dimension referred to "ready children", which focuses on children's

ability to learn at the school and to acquire good learning outcomes. A second dimension refers to “ready school”, which considers the school practices that support the learning for all children in order to help them smoothly transition to the next level. The last dimension is “ready family”, which considers the parents and caregivers’ perceptions and behavior towards their children’s education and development. In general, nowadays school readiness was recognized as a multi-faceted construct which involves not only children and school but also include the family as it is one of the most important factors for school readiness success (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006; UNICEF, 2012).

2.2 Families’ Readiness for School

With reference to school readiness, there are several elements that influence children to be ready for school, including both internal and external factors. Specifically, the external factors highlighted the influence of family on children’s development. Since birth to the time children enters school, they make a leap development in many domains, including language, cognitive, and social-emotional development, and it is parents or primary caregivers who play a crucial role for these developments.

The ready family specified that the family should provide opportunities for children to learn and develop, as well as to take responsibility for the children's school readiness through frequent-positive involvement. Although children learn much through independent exploration, they need competent adult's guides to provide critical elements of high-quality learning environments (Vygotsky, 1978). Skillful adults provided not only affectionate relationships that support confidence but also structured the environment to provide challenges, coach the learning process by providing feedback and offered an interpretation of the world that the children are exploring. Thus, the adults became learning partners who mentor young children as they explored the world in which they live.

According to Pianta (2003), parents can prepare their children's school readiness in four specific roles. First, parents are the main supporters. The most basic roles of parents are to provide their children love, emotional bonding between parents and child as well as support healthy self-esteem. Second, parents are the primary teachers. They can motivate early learning and development by giving opportunities for children to learn in home activities such as learning through play and interacting with siblings and communities. Third, parents are intermediaries. Their role is to bridge the relationship between their children and local community where they live such

as relatives, friends, and neighbors in order to help children learn with a social environment and become productive in the community. Forth, parents as advocates. They can actively build school relationship for their children as well as encourage them to continue education for the future.

With reference to this, the present study hypothesized that Lao parents and caregivers may not be able to accomplish all the roles, especially for parents from low socioeconomic status families. Indeed, the Lao parents may be good at taking care of their young children physically and emotionally, however, lacking family resources and parents with low educational attainment may find it is difficult to provide materials or environment that foster young children's learning and development. Thus, the parents may not be able to fully respond to all their children's needs.

Supportive and responsive parents have been considered to be another aspect of the ready family because they are not only promoting early learning development, but also social-emotional well-being of children. The study on responsive parenting indicated that mothers or caregivers who responded appropriate amount to their children's needs; their children will gain better physical and psychological health compared to those whose mother provided the least amount of responsiveness (Eshel, Daelmans, Mello, & Martines,

2006). Depending on how parents support and respond to the child's needs, it can directly influence the holistic development of children.

3. Parent's Perceptions, Involvement and Influences on School Readiness

Caregivers' expectations or beliefs toward their child's early development and school preparedness are significantly associated with their practice and hence, children's school achievement (Barbarin et al., 2008b; Landry & Smith, 2008). On the other hand, "Caregivers who do not believe they are important as a 'teacher' for their child but rather attribute this role to others (i.e., teacher, childcare workers) or to 'luck' are less likely to provide cognitively rich experiences" (Hess & Shipman, 1965, as cited in Landry & Smith, 2008, p. 95). Thus, the way in which caregivers' perceived in school readiness tends to affect their choice and behavior to help prepare their children to be ready for school.

Understanding parents' views of readiness are important because they are known as the primary teachers of their children (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2004; Olsen & Fuller, 2019). In addition, it may help us to understand what, in parents' opinions, is most important for children to start school and how they help prepare their children to be ready for school. Even though previous

study claimed that there were limited studies focusing on factors that motivate parents' engagement in children's early learning (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008), many of the studies emphasized that parental involvement was associated with children's later academic achievement, especially for children from low socioeconomic status families (Barbarin et al., 2008; Epstein, 1995).

Overall, parents' decision on children learning experience prior to formal schooling is important for children's development (Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992). Prior research indicated that parents' decisions toward their child's early development are influenced by their beliefs (Barbarin et al., 2008). If parents recognize the importance of school, they will engage in their child education (Barbarin et al., 2008), make choices over which pre-school their child will attend and which types of activities to promote optimal outcomes (Bates et al., 1994; Stipek et al., 1992). A number of researches showed that parents who were actively engaged in their child's education played a key role in early academic achievement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004).

There are several factors that may influence parental perceptions and involvement which are often related to their socioeconomic status (SES). For

instance, parents' high education levels have been linked to children's achievement in school. A previous study implied that parental belief of a child's education was influenced by their own education attainment (Bornstein et al., 2003). These parents are more likely to engage in communication, interaction, and involvement in their child learning activities in both inside and outside the home to stimulate optimal growth during the early years which are the most important predictors of later school achievement. Indeed, the studies have shown that children from high SES families performed a higher level of emergent literacy skills compared to their peers from lower SES households (Bowey, 1995; Lonigan, Anthony, Bloomfield, Dyer, & Samwel, 1999).

Some evidence suggests that a family's poverty may affect parental involvement. Previous study highlighted that children from a low-income family were often marginalized by their caregivers as they often exposed to a tough environment which is not supported for leaning (Evans, 2004). Moreover, poverty was seen to be a predictor of low parent investments of money and time for their child education (Gershoff, Aber, & Raver, 2005). In addition, poor children lack stimulations at home that provided by their parents or caregivers, for instance, the interaction through daily routine activities (Britto, Fuligni, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Forget-Dubois et al., 2009),

and teaching of basic skills needed to be gasped before going to elementary school, such as reading numbers, identifying letters and following instructions (Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark, & Howes, 2010). Another study discovered that many children who were assumed to be unready for the school were those from the disadvantaged neighborhood including poverty (Janus, Walsh, Viverios, Duku, & Offord, 2003). In summary, these studies provided a shred of strong evidence that poor children often enter school with insufficient skills and low level of school readiness.

The study of Durham and Smith (2006) examined whether or not the metropolitan status was linked to early literacy readiness. The result indicated that in rural disadvantaged areas where the lack of resources existed had a negative impact on the child's early literacy ability in comparison to those living in more urban areas (Durham & Smith, 2006). The authors also suggested that this relationship differed across poverty levels, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Similarly, in the study of "Family Functioning and Child Development in the Context of Poverty" (Mistry & Wadsworth, 2011), biological perspectives were used to capture the children's development within a social context. By applying the parental investment model, the result showed that low-income mothers tend to have less communication with their child and are less engaged in literacy activities which in turn effect on reading

and writing skills. Strengthening the relationship with family members such as parents, siblings and relatives were suggested to be important to create opportunities for learning.

Alongside with family income, parental involvement also varies depending on race and ethnicity. Particularly, ethnicity was found to be at a greater risk of insufficient school readiness (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Minority parents might find it is difficult, if not possible to engage in their children's education because they had limited resources (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Also, parents' engagement might have more to do with their emotional and intellectual abilities rather than their incentive (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Furthermore, Brooks-Gunn & Markman (2005) examined the extensive literature on the ethnic gap in school readiness, especially the language used and conversation interacted at home. They found that black mothers perform lower than their white peers in terms of nurturance, discipline, teaching, language, and materials. To understand how parents contribute to these gaps, it is important to examine parental characteristics. It is likely that the parent's belief and attitude shape their behavior during interactions with their children. However, there is little understanding of the reason behind those behaviors such as the

lack of resources afforded at home. Therefore, it is needed to explore more particularly the reasons behind the parents' behavior.

However, the longitudinal study on family involvement and children's literacy performance among 281 ethnically diverse low-income parents (Dearing et al., 2006) found that less educated mothers associated with a low level of involvement compared to the more educated ones. However, Dearing and colleagues (2006) further demonstrated that when parents increased their school involvement, their child literacy performance was also increased. From this result, they supported the claim that involvement itself is a strong predictor on child literacy development rather than family income, educational level, and ethnicity. Furthermore, SES may not be the main factor that contributed to school readiness, but it more likely depends on family characteristics such as parents' attitude toward learning, academic guidance, and the quality literacy interaction.

4. School Readiness and Home Literacy Environment

Home literacy environment is broadly defined as the literacy activities and materials provided by parents, caregivers, and other family members at home (Bracken & Fischel, 2008). It is well-established that home literacy environment was found to be a key predictor of children's language and

literacy development (Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006), and thus, a higher level of school readiness (Duncan et al., 2007; Loera, Rueda, & Nakamoto, 2011). Previous study has proved that the activities that parents and their child engaged in the home were significantly increased young children's language and literacy performance in a later grade (Jung, 2016).

Parents can engage in literacy practice with their children in two different ways. The first way refers to informal literacy activities, which appear in the form of parent-child interactions and discussions about the stories' meaning when they have shared book-reading sessions at home. Another way is the formal literacy activities, which parents focus more on the concept of prints aiming to teach children the alphabets and their sound (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). In other words, the informal literacy activities have been found to be linked with children's oral language development (Sénéchal, 2006), whereas the formal literacy activities appeared to be correlated with the written language skills in young children (Foy & Mann, 2003; Martini & Sénéchal, 2012).

Overall, the parent-child reading experience was one of the important aspects of home literacy practice. Reading experience between parents and children not only allowed them to not be familiar with words and sounds but also made them exposed to grammar structures and vocabulary, which

simulated their literacy awareness. In addition, it also was found to increase children's interest in reading (Barnyak, 2011; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). As children are read to, they explored the structure of books and prints, and these foundations will serve as a powerful bridge for literacy learning when they enter school.

Shared book-reading sessions between parents and their children at home become meaningful opportunities that enhance children's ability to read as well as tighten the relationship between parents and children. While reading with children, parents often engaged in discussions and asked questions related to storybook, which stimulated children's prediction, imagination, and interpretation (Morrow, 1990). In addition, Dickinson and Smith (1994) proposed that the types of questions that parents ask tend to affect their children's understanding of the story. Moreover, the study has shown that conversations occurred during book reading sessions fostered not only children's comprehension of the text but also the positive emotions between parents and children (Mathes & Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

The relationship between home literacy environment and children's early literacy and language development might differ depending on the family's socioeconomic status. For example, Hart & Risley (1995) found that

children from low socioeconomic status were exposed to fewer words and fewer interactions from parents than their higher socioeconomic counterparts. Parents in low-income families may struggle to provide activities that positively influenced literacy development such as reading, singing, and playing with their children. Similarly, Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, & Scher, (1996) examined the perspectives of low-income parents of children's early literacy at home. They found that these parents involved in more traditional structured activities. On the other hand, middle-class children are engaged in more entertainment activities including storybook reading and drawing.

Parental level of education was also found to be associated with their abilities to engage in the home literacy practice with their children. A study showed that children's literacy skills were influenced by their parental educational background (Rowe, Denmark, Jones Harden, & Stapleton, 2015 their child to stimulate literacy development, on the other hand, the results were found to be the opposite for parents who have a low level of education and low literacy skills (Loera et al., 2011). Therefore, to understand the effects of home literacy environment on children's school readiness, this study aims to examine how parents engage in reading activities with their children and how their socioeconomic statuses influence the way they are involved in the home literacy environment.). Parents with high education

were more likely to involve in communication and interaction with their children and how their socioeconomic status influence the way they involve in the home literacy environment.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Based on the literature review in the prior chapter, the following research questions were derived. This chapter will further explain the main terms that were used in the current study.

1. Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine families' perceptions and involvement in the young children's school readiness in Lao PDR. To answer the research questions of this study, the following focus questions were used:

1) From Lao caregivers' perspectives, what does it mean for children to be ready for school?
2) How do Lao caregivers promote school readiness for their child?

2. Definition of Key Terms

School readiness is defined by three interlinked dimensions, which are "ready children", "ready school" and "ready family" (UNICEF, 2012). Broader definitions of school readiness refers to children's early learning and

development in five domains including (1) physical health, well-being, and motor development; (2) social and emotional development; (3) approaches toward learning; (4) language, literacy and communication; (5) cognition and general knowledge (Kagan, Moore & Bradekamp, 1995, La Paro & Pianta, 2000).

Caregiver refers to a person who takes responsibilities in child rearing practice. In this study, the primary caregivers are family members including parents, grandparents, and relatives.

Perception refers to the values, attitudes, and beliefs associated with child education and school readiness.

Parental involvement is defined as parents' role of preparing their child to be ready for school. This includes the involvement in home learning environment practices and activities to stimulate learning and development (Epstein, 1995).

IV. METHODS

The following chapter gives an insight into the methodology describing the researcher's subjectivity, research design and participants. Additionally, the procedure of data collection and analysis are also described.

1. Researcher's Subjectivity

The subjectivity statement is specified so that all related experiences of the researcher are clearly presented. This is my first experience engaging in focus group studies with Lao parents regarding their perceptions and involvement in school readiness. I grew up in Vientiane capital of Laos. Prior to beginning my Master's program, I was an undergraduate student at the National University of Laos, majoring in Rural and Community Development. During my undergraduate years, I devoted many hours of doing volunteer work to support children in need and their families. Through these experiences, I have learned that there are still many children in Laos who do not have access to good education and quality of life.

However, due to my lack of knowledge and skills, I could not do anything much to change these circumstances. I decided to study abroad, which I believe not many people can achieve this opportunity. I would like

to prove many parents that their children could do it the same and there is no limitation for education. Currently, I am a Master student at Seoul National University, which is known as one of the best universities in South Korea. I chose Child Development and Family Studies as my major as I am interested and have a foundation in this field of study. I have learned that to effectively help people improve their lives, we first have to understand their beliefs and situations. Even though I am a Lao who was raised in the capital city, I do not claim to fully understand the culture of living in as areas with different family beliefs, strength, and struggles. Therefore, through this study, I hope to gain deeper knowledge about Lao people's perceptions and practices on school readiness and use that knowledge to provide practical solutions to their existing problems.

2. Research Design

The primary qualitative data was used as the main source for this study. The very nature of qualitative research methodology enables researchers to understand the complexity of social interactions and participants' perspective which are not immediately observable but obtained through inductive analysis of data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The data was obtained through eight focus group interviews (FGIs) with 34 caregivers whose child was in

the early year of primary school. A focus group is “a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic” (Anderson, 1995). The reason to use this tool is that focus group interview provides a dynamic for participants to discuss and interact with each other, and more importantly, they also have an opportunity to influence or are influenced by others within the group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Particularly in the current study, caregivers whose child was already studied in school might have more ideas to say about school than those who did not have experience. So, they can share information with each other during the discussion process. Therefore, the focus group interview method was chosen to be the tool for this study.

3. Participants

A purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) was used to select participants who were preparing their child for the first formal school and whose child was the first and second grader of elementary school. These two groups of caregivers were mixed so that they could share their ideas on how they had perceived and prepared their child for school. The participants described themselves as primary caregivers, guardians or the main persons who responsibilities in child rearing practice, which involved not only parents

but also grandparents and relatives. Some caregivers reported that a child's parents worked away from home, so they decided to be the child's guardian. There was a total of 34 participants, with 27 females and 7 males, respectively. Among them, 27 participants were of Lao ethnic origins, 7 were ethnic minorities (Hmong[1]). Specifically, it is to be noted that the Hmong caregivers are different from other Lao caregivers in terms of their traditions and language used, so they were put in separate focus groups.

Furthermore, the age of participants fell between 24-73 years old. Participant's highest educational attainment was master's degrees, and the lowest was illiteracy. Their jobs were various such as business owners, government officers, private officers, farmers, and housewives. Demographic information about the participants is summarized in Table 1. Moreover, the participants' child enrolled from kindergarten to grade 2 level of primary school (26 children were preparing for the formal school and 8 children were studying in the primary school). Their ages ranged from 3- to 7-year-old (see Table 2 for the child characteristics of the participants).

[1] Hmong is one of the ethnic minority groups that live in a hind land rural area of Lao PDR. Hmong has a unique tradition of agriculture practices which shape their way of life. Although the education of Hmong in Lao PDR was seen to be improving over time, they still lag behind the Lao and other ethnic groups. The limitation to access to resources including school, road and infrastructure, the slow process of government support and language use are three main barriers that prevent Hmong children from accessing to the education in Lao PDR (Yang, 2008).

Table 1.

Participants' Demographic Information

Participants' Demographic Information		n
Gender		
	Male	7
	Female	27
Status	Father	5
	Mother	20
	Grandparents	6
	Relatives	3
Ethnicity	Lao	28
	Hmong	6
Age range	20-29 years old	4
	30-39 years old	18
	40-49 years old	7
	50-59 years old	3
	60-69 years old	1
	70-79 years old	1
Education	Master's	1
	Bachelor's	1
	Some collage	3
	High school	7
	Secondary school	9
	Primary school	11
	None	2
Occupation	Government officer	6
	Private officer	2
	Business owner	14
	Farmer	3
	House wife	9

Table 2.

Child Characteristics of the Participants

Participants ID	Status	Child Gender	Child Age	Child Education
Central Areas				
FGI 1 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Mother	Girl	7	Grade1
Participant 2	Uncle	Girl	3	Kindergarten
FGI 2 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Grandmother	Boy	4	Kindergarten
Participant 2	Father	Girl	4	Kindergarten
Participant 3	Mother	Girl	7	Grade2
Participant 4	Mother	Boy	4	Kindergarten
FGI 3 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Mother	Boy	3	Kindergarten
Participant 2	Mother	Girl	7	Grade2
Participant 3	Father	Boy	3	Kindergarten
Participant 4	Mother	Boy	7	Grade1
Participant 5	Mother	Boy	4	Kindergarten
Participant 6	Mother	Girl	4	Kindergarten
Suburb Areas				
FGI 4 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Aunt	Girl	4	Kindergarten
Participant 2	Mother	Boy	7	Grade2
Participant 3	Father	Boy	5	Kindergarten
Participant 4	Father	Girl	3	Kindergarten
Participant 5	Mother	Girl	3	Kindergarten
FGI 5 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Grandmother	Girl	4	Kindergarten
Participant 2	Aunt	Boy	3	Kindergarten
Participant 3	Mother	Girl	3	Kindergarten
Participant 4	Grandfather	Boy	4	Kindergarten
Participant 5	Father	Girl	3	Kindergarten

Table2. Continued

Participants ID	Status	Child Gender	Child Age	Child Education
Participant 6	Mother	Girl	5	Kindergarten
Participant 7	Mother	Girl	4	Kindergarten
FGI 6 (Lao)				
Participant 1	Grandmother	Boy	5	Kindergarten
Participant 2	Grandmother	Girl	3	Kindergarten
Participant 3	Grandmother	Boy	3	Kindergarten
Participant 4	Mother	Girl	4	Kindergarten
FGI 7 (Hmong)				
Participant 1	Mother	Boy	6	Pre-primary
Participant 2	Mother	Girl	5	Grade1
FGI 8 (Hmong)				
Participant 1	Mother	Boy	5	Pre-primary
Participant 2	Mother	Boy	7	Grade2
Participant 3	Mother	Boy	5	Pre-primary
Participant 4	Mother	Boy	6	Grade1

4. Procedures

Several villages in Vientiane capital were chosen to be the research sites of the study, due to the convenience to access and they are among the largest centers of the country with the variety of households for comparisons. Prior to data collection, I visited the targeted villages in order to meet the village authorities to explain to them about my study and what I hoped to gain from this study. The village chiefs welcomed me very well as I introduced

myself as a Master student who studies at the Seoul National University, South Korea. In Lao society, every matter related to households or participants is generally led by village chiefs. Therefore, I expected that they would facilitate me with selecting participants who met the criteria of research requirements and also arrange the schedule for focus group interviews.

The data collection was conducted during January and February 2019 with a total of eight focus group interviews. The interviews took place in local villages where participants were living (e.g., village center, primary school, and participants' houses). Prior to the interviews, I established a good relationship with participants by engaging in social conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Following this, the purpose of the study, the length of the interview, and potential risks and benefits were carefully explained to the participants. Each focus group interview lasted for about 1.5 – 2 hours. A voice recorder was requested to use in order to transcribe data properly. In addition, the researcher also made hand-writing notes to capture the important moments or the participant's emphasized information that cannot be obtained through voice recording.

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis process of this study involved several stages as proceeded by Krueger & Casey (2002). The first stage was to store the voice recordings into computer files in order to prevent losses and damages. Following this, the voice recordings were transcribed and translated from Lao into English. Also, the notes from each interview were compiled on a daily basis to ensure that all information was captured while the memory about discussions was still fresh in mind.

Once the data had been transcribed, the second stage was to upload the transcripts into NVivo software program. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that is suitable for organizing and managing data as well as helps to create nodes or themes. I started by creating the main themes based on the three dimensions of school readiness literature (ready children, ready school, and ready teacher). During the analysis process, I read through all the information numerous times in order to thoroughly understand, as Agar (1980) suggested that "reading the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking them into part" (p. 103). Along with this process, I also noted the

information that indicated similarities as well as differences across participants' discussion in order to obtain the common points between them.

In the last stage, the best capture quotes and sub-themes were generated based on categorized data. Subsequently, all the themes and sub-themes were interpreted into the larger meaning in order to get an in-depth understanding of how Lao caregivers perceive and promote school readiness for their child.

V. RESULTS

In this study, 34 caregivers from Lao PDR shared their perceptions and experiences of preparing their children for school. As illustrated in Table 3, three themes were selected based on the current literature on school readiness. After that, the following sub-themes were generated according to the caregivers' discussions: (1) Ready Children, which stresses that children are ready for school when they are physically ready, social-emotionally ready and cognitively ready; (2) Ready School, which illustrates the mismatch between caregivers' expectations and school readiness in which caregivers understand school readiness is influenced by teachers and the school but not by themselves; and (3) Ready Family, which shows different groups of caregivers have different levels of involvement in daily routines with their children. A description of each theme and sub-theme is explained below:

Table 3. The Relationship between Themes, Sub-themes and Research Questions

Research Questions	**Themes and Sub-themes**
Q1: From Lao parents' perspectives, what does it mean to be ready for school?	1. Ready Children: Children are Ready When They are… 1) Physically Ready 2) Socially and Emotionally Ready 3) Cognitively Ready
	2. Ready School: Mismatch between Caregivers' Expectations and School Readiness 1) Readiness is Teacher's Responsibility 2) School is not Ready for Children 3) School Choice Depends on Family Resources
Q2: How do Lao parents promote school readiness for their child?	3. Ready Family: Different Voices, Different Involvement 1) Promoting Readiness through Daily Routines 2) Too Young to Read 3) Different Roles for Different Family Members

1. Ready Children: Children are Ready When They are:

1) Physically Ready

This sub-theme emerged when the caregivers discussed on the issue of age entrance for school. Because the age appropriateness for school enrollment is defined differently by each type of school (e.g., kindergarten, pre-primary school), it often confused the caregivers on when they should take their children to school. Indeed, all caregivers in this study agreed that children nowadays started school at an earlier age than their generations. They provided a specific example of the traditional entrance rule, which emphasized physical readiness rather than the actual age of children. This enrollment standard was being able to use the left hand to reach the right ear over the head and vice versa. If children failed to do that, they would not be qualified for school:

> Participant 3: In the past, many parents took their child to school because he/she seemed to be ready. Now you cannot do that anymore. When I took my daughter to school for the first time, the school principal asked for a family book to check her date of birth. It is not that they will believe what you tell them.
>
> Participant 1: She is right. In my generation, if you could use your right hand to reach your left ear, you could go to school. It took me until 8 years old to start school. (FGI2)
>
> Participant 4: I think children start to go to school earlier these days. In the past, we didn't have kindergarten. If we could not

> use our hand to reach our opposite ear, we would not be allowed to study at primary school. Many of us had to wait until 8-9 years old. (FGI5)

This example illustrated that children's readiness was perceived as physically ready in the past. However, in recent years, this custom has been abolished and replaced by an age-entrance regulation, in which parents have to follow the school's instructions on age eligibility. However, among the caregivers to whom I talked during the focus group interviews, one mother emphasized that sometimes the age itself does not define children's readiness level. She complained that because of the entrance cut off, her son had to wait, which then affected his studies:

> My son attended school late because he was born at the end of the year. His birthday was on 16 December 2008. It's like while the other kids started to speak in class, my son was still laying down with the towel… I don't agree with the entrance age. If they [the school] don't consider about it and just let children who were born in the same year study together, at least let them try, some children who are younger might be able to study well. (Participant 4, FGI3)

The issues of age and readiness were discussed among caregivers who had a school-aged child. However, it was unclear whether age influenced children's ability to perform at school and when the caregivers should take their children to school. While some caregivers emphasized on a child's age to determine readiness, others believed that readiness should be considered based on the physical conditions of children.

2) Socially and Emotionally Ready

The second sub-theme showed that the majority of caregivers described their opinions on school readiness as children's social-emotional abilities to adapt to a school environment. Since many caregivers' children were attending kindergarten, they explained how this pre-school education helped their children to be ready for school socially and emotionally. For instance, the caregivers talked about children's ability to make friends, which in turn helped them to regulate their emotions and make meaningful friendships with others:

> It is good that children can start study earlier. They start to learn little by little and learn to make friends. So they will be able to adapt to the school environment. In the opposite way, if we don't take children to kindergarten, they will be afraid to meet new people. (Participant 1, FGI2)

> If they study in kindergarten, they will start to meet new people earlier. I think children who study at kindergarten and not study have different thoughts and experiences. (Participant 3, FGI4)

The caregivers did not only talk about children's capability to make friends with others, but they also mentioned that the ready children should be able to express their emotions, know how to ask and respond to the questions:

> I made a good decision that I took my kids to kindergarten since they were young because children were curious when they wanted to know something, they asked. Also in grade1, when the teacher

> asks them, they will answer because they already learn that from kindergarten. On the other hand, children who do not go to kindergarten, when they study in grade1, they did not know how to ask, and they are even afraid to talk. For example, when the teacher asks them something, they will just be quiet, no talk. (Participant 3, FGI2)

3) Cognitively Ready

Although the caregivers in this study described children's physical and social-emotional readiness, they also recognized the importance of cognitive and academic skills for starting their education at a formal school. They were asked specifically what their child learned in kindergarten and what they needed to know and be able to do before entering elementary school. The majority of them believed school readiness for children was to master all basic academic skills such as knowing how to read and write the alphabets, vowels, and numbers. These skills would serve as a foundation for academic success in the future.

From a group of Hmong caregivers' perspectives, readiness was not only the basic academic skills but also children's fluency in the common language at school. Since Hmong children communicate in their mother tongue at home and do not speak Lao with their ethnic friends when they come to school, their ability to understand and speak Lao language is often

below the average. Looking on the opposite side, the teachers who work in Hmong school have to speak Hmong in order for children to understand and follow instructions. This action is in contrast with caregivers' needs. The Hmong caregivers said that they did not speak Lao with their children at home, thus they expected teachers could help them in this particular area. Furthermore, even though the Hmong caregivers emphasized it was considered abnormal for them to teach Lao language at home for their children, four out of six mothers in the focus group narrated that sometimes they taught their child Lao words. One mother said:

> The word for eating, in Hmong we said "Nor Mor". My son asked me how can he say "Nor Mor" in Lao language and I told him that it was "Kin Kao." (Participant 1, FGI8)

Another common issue that caregivers mentioned regarding the academic cognitive skills was the difficulty of the lessons taught in kindergarten nowadays. Because the caregivers remembered the relevant details of their own early school year, it can be hard for them to appreciate just how much the early education landscape has been transformed today. Since early education practices to promote school readiness have become more critical, many caregivers agreed that the lessons children study now were much more difficult than in the past.

Participant 4: The situation in the school now is like this, they use the lesson for grade1 to teach in kindergarten3. They [school] push children to learn harder. Children started to learn mathematics in kindergarten3 and they have to have an exam in order to go to grade1. If children cannot pass the exam, they will stay in the same class with no exception. Like in the school at that my son is attending, the teacher will give student 40-50 questions before the exam in order for them to memorize. I have no idea how young children can answer such questions. (FGI3)

Participant 4: You know nowadays the lessons in grade 1 are very difficult compared to what we learned in the past. I cannot even teach my child because some lessons I didn't even learn before.

Participant 1: There is even a division in kindergarten now.

Parent 3: I remember when I was in grade1; there was even no subtraction yet.

Participant 2: Now parents became buffalos. (FGI4)

In summary, to the caregivers, ready children are those who are physically, social-emotionally, and cognitively ready. In addition, Hmong caregivers also considered language development as a factor to determine school readiness for their children.

2. Ready School: Mismatch between Caregivers' Expectations and School Readiness

1) Readiness is Teacher's Responsibility

Although the three dimensions of school readiness (e.g., ready children, ready school and ready family) are well-recognized in the literature (UNICEF, 2012), the results revealed that "ready teacher" was extended by the caregivers in the present study. The caregivers' perceived readiness was not only a child component, but it was also fostered by teachers. In the caregivers' point of view, teachers played an important role in preparing children for school. For instance, they expected teachers to teach their child to read and write before these children enroll in an elementary school. On the other hand, they did not perceive if school preparation could be done by parents.

Even though the caregivers relied on teachers to help their child to be ready, their communication with teachers was limited. This indicated that the caregivers knew very little about how their child spent the day at school or what they should do to be more involved in their child's learning. Instead, they only knew what was going on at school from the exam book that was sent home monthly. Among the participants in the focus group interviews,

only a few mothers said they sometimes talked to the teachers about how their child's performing in class when they picked their child up from school. One mother gave an interesting reason that teachers did not communicate with parent because "they might feel uncomfortable if they talked something bad about children and they might be afraid of parents' reactions".

A barrier in communication between teachers and caregivers can cause tension between them. For example, a mother, who used to have a career as a teacher criticized the lack of parent-teacher communication which affected her child's academic outcomes:

> My son retained grade1 last year. I asked the teacher "why didn't you let me know that my son cannot study until the last 2 weeks of the semester?", so now, what could I do to help my child in 2 weeks? She made an excuse that she didn't have a mobile phone. I can't even believe how she could say that. Nowadays everyone uses mobile phones. Then I said that "I know the school principal very well, if he [son] cannot study, you can just tell your principal and they can contact me". Then, she just kept saying sorry. To be honest, I don't want to accept that "sorry" because my son has to waste one more year. When I was a teacher, three months before the semester ends, I observed children who could not study, and I even spent my lunchtime to teach them because I wanted them to pass. If you are a good teacher, you will never let your students fail. You will find a way to help them to pass. (Participant 4, FGI3)

When the needs of parents and caregivers were not being met, they started to blame the teachers for not being ready to teach their children. Many caregivers in this study talked about teachers in terms of their abilities to teach

children effectively. They believed that the teachers did not have high degrees and much teaching experience. For example, a group of caregivers expressed their thought about unready teachers:

> Participant 4: A lot of teachers still don't know how to convey knowledge to students effectively. Many teachers just learn what to teach, but they never have experience of working with young children. When they work in reality, they have no idea how to deal with children because all children are not the same.
>
> Participant 3: I think children will study well or not depends on both teacher and student. (FGI3)

Similarly, all Hmong caregivers from this study emphasized that the teachers were not ready to teach Lao language to their children. While Hmong caregivers wanted the teachers to speak only Lao language with their children at school, the teachers have to speak both languages to help children understand. Ultimately, when the caregivers could not see the progress in their children; they criticized teachers of not doing their jobs well. For example, one mother said:

> As you might know that the majority of students are Hmong, but the teacher is Lao. I think she speaks Hmong all the time with the children and now my son still doesn't know how to speak Lao at all. His study has become worse. So I want the teacher to teach Lao language more. If she just speaks Hmong, so how could my son ever speak Laos? (Participant 1, FGI7)

The issue of teacher's responsibility was discussed frequently by the caregivers on whether they had done their best to help children ready for school. To them, teachers were one of the most important factors influences children's readiness. However, the findings also showed that the lack of communication between teachers and caregivers caused tension among them, and it was also a reason why caregivers thought that teachers were not ready to teach their children.

2) School is not Ready for Children

During the focus group interviews, the caregivers also talked about the importance of ready school. They described that ready school is a characteristic of school administrations and management. Regardless of school levels, the caregivers mentioned two specific types of school which are private and public schools. Indeed, caregivers believed that private schools have the potential to help their children better than public schools because of the better quality of teaching and care. On the other hand, they believed that teachers did not receive adequate training in public schools which affected their teaching abilities.

In terms of classroom management, the caregivers expressed their concern about schools that had too many students in one class with only one

teacher. This issue seemed to happen in both public and private schools. When there were too many children in each classroom, the caregivers were concerned that their children might not be able to study well. Also, they were afraid if the teacher could take care of all children equally. For example, a mother noted, “teachers cannot hold everyone’s hand to write”. Some caregivers expressed their hope that the schools could reduce the number of children in each class or include more teachers:

> Participant 1: I think the teacher is good. However, there are too many students in the class that is why she cannot pay attention to all children.
>
> Participant 2: I agree, the schools accepted too many children.
>
> Participant 4: they have to sit together in one table, and there is no fan. I can’t imagine how hot it might be. (FGI4)
>
> Participant 1: It is true that if there are too many students in the class, the teacher cannot pay attention to everyone. So if the teacher cannot take care of our children well, how can they study well?
>
> Participant 4: It will be better if the school use the money that we paid to hire more teachers. (FGI5)

3) School Choice Depends on Family Resources

Although the private schools were perceived to be more ready compared to public schools, the caregivers had to consider their abilities to afford children’s tuition fee and study materials. In other words, the

caregivers did not only consider the target schools based on their qualities but also their financial resources. Since there was a lack of financial support or free education for young children in Lao PDR, parents or caregivers have to pay for children's education themselves. Particularly, if they want their children to attend private schools, they have to pay the tuition per month. On the other hand, they will only pay tuition once a year for public schools. An example of choosing school was displayed below:

> Participant 3: The tuition fee in private schools is expensive, but teachers take good care of our children. (FGI5)
>
> Participant 4: For private schools, you have to pay the tuition fee every month. If parents cannot deal with it, children will not be able to study there. (FGI3)
>
> Participant 2: I don't have money to send my children to a private school. So I took them to the public school near our house. It is cheaper because you only pay once a year. (FGI7)
>
> Participant 4: I don't want to say but…talking about teachers at public schools, they do not take care of our child well. As you know all parents want teachers to take good care of our child, it is not that we want to see their face dirty like a cat when we pick them up from school. (FGI3)

All in all, even though the caregivers preferred their children to attend private schools, many of them could not afford it especially the ones from low-income families, who have many children. It could be said that the school choice was determined by family resources rather than the need for caregivers. To them, both school and teachers are not yet ready for their children. In other

words, the caregivers' expectations about teachers and school are not yet being met.

3. Ready Family: Different Voices, Different Involvement

1) Promoting Readiness through Daily Routines

With regard to preparing children for school, the caregivers in this study provided their routines at home intended to expose their child to particular activities and play that they considered important in facilitating children's learning. Specifically, most of the caregivers said that they were usually involved in daily routines such as preparing their child for school and helping them with homework. While school readiness was perceived to be the responsibility of those who work for children such as teachers and school, many caregivers thought that their involvement was just as important and impactful:

> Every morning I usually prepare food for my daughter, make sure that she has breakfast before going to school. Around 4:30 pm, I pick her up from school. After having a shower and dinner, I will tell her to do homework. If it is not me, her sisters will teach her instead. She cannot do it alone because sometimes she has questions and the lessons are quite difficult especially math. (Participant 3, FGI2)

Helping children with school tasks and homework is one thing that caregivers could do to foster their learning. During the focus group interviews, it seemed that the grandparent-headed families had very little to say about children's school. Because they did not have school experiences, they had difficulty helping their grandchildren with homework. All they could do was to take care of their grandchildren's well-being. For example, two grandmothers said:

> Participant 4: I don't do many things. I just take him to school and feed him. (FGI5)

> Participant 1: I don't know how to help my grandchild with his homework because I don't know how to read and write. The teacher drawn the alphabet dots in the book, I saw him lay on the floor and write on it. (FGI6)

Even though the caregivers in this study did not recognize it was their duty to help children ready, they did not ignore the importance of play and activities that they should engage with children at home. The common activities that they usually engaged in with their children were drawing, painting, watching TV, cooking, and playing games. For example, one mother narrated about the activities that she did with her children during the weekend:

> We don't usually do many activities from Monday to Friday because they go to school. Mostly we spend time together on the weekend. Sometimes, they asked me to make a cake. Because they watched it on YouTube and they wanted to do it, so we do it together. If it tastes good, then we can eat it and sometimes we

> have to throw it away (laugh). It's ok because they want to learn. Sometimes, my daughters paint the pictures together and cut the paper everywhere. The house is always messy. Even though it angers me, I just let them do it because I want them to play and learn. (Participant 3, FGI2)

Another mother talked about the outdoor activities that she did with her children:

> Normally, we only have time together in the evening. We usually talk during dinner time, asking each other about school and friends. However, we like to spend time together at the weekend to go eat out, shopping and swimming. In addition, they also like to play games with their father. They are very smart, and they even play better than their father, especially the little one. (Participant 1, FGI1)

Unlike Lao caregivers, the Hmong mothers said that they barely engaged in the activities with children at home. Instead, one mother stated that working with children was a type of activities that they usually did together:

> We usually go to the farm to collect vegetables together in order to sell it. They help me because they want the money to go to school. (Participant 2, FGI7)

In addition, the Hmong caregivers believed that playing made their children unruly. Therefore, they seemed to be unpleased with school and teachers when they tried to include playing and activities in the school curriculum. All the Hmong caregivers who participated in the focus group

interviews emphasized that they wanted their children to just study so they will not have to repeat the class.

> Participant 2: The primary school in our village has a pre-primary class which is equal to kindergarten3. It is a one year program for preparing children for grade1. However, the teacher lets children play too much, and she also speaks Hmong with them. I wanted her to teach my child to speak Lao.
>
> Participant 1: My son is also studying at the village school. I assume that he still cannot speak Lao. Because he has Hmong friends and he plays with them too much, that is why his study has become worse. I am so worried. (FGI7)
>
> Participant 3: I think the teacher should teach better than this because I want my child to know Lao language, know things around him. I want to suggest that children should learn all day at school, not just let them play. I assumed that students don't study much, and the teacher doesn't teach much as well. (FGI8)

One Hmong caregiver said that she kept her child at home and from playing with friends outside in order to make him study. This type of practice assumed to be very common for people who lived in rural communities:

> I don't let him go outside to play with his friends because I am afraid that he will be naughty. We have fences around the house, and I lock the door as soon as he comes back from school so he will not go out and his friend will not come in. (Participant 1, FGI8)

Overall, the level of involvement in daily routines was varied depending on each family. The findings showed that grandparent-headed families faced a unique challenge in helping their grandchildren to be ready

for school. While in Lao families, the caregivers were more likely to engage in children's homework as well as home activities and playing, the level of involvement was different in the Hmong families.

2) Too Young to Read

Many researchers believed that parents' perceptions of school readiness affected the activities that they chose to promote at home (Bates et al., 1994; Stipek et al., 1992). Parental involvement and engaging in literacy activities such as storybook reading (Barnyak, 2011) may contribute to their child's vocabulary growth and literacy development. The results of this study showed that caregivers participated in many types of activities at home with their children, however, those activities were both, directly and indirectly, related to activities that are needed for school preparedness. Particularly, the caregivers said that they knew very little or not about the activities which are recommended by kindergartens or schools. When they were asked about if they read with their children at home, the majority of them refused reading as their duty. Instead, it was presumed to be mainly teachers' responsibility. Some caregivers supported the idea that children usually started to read after they entered primary school:

Int: Do you read for your child?

Participant 4: No, I don't read for my children. I usually draw and paint pictures with them. These kids spend time more on painting than reading.

Participant 3: Yeah, I just play with my daughter but I don't really read for her. I think reading books for children are a teacher's job. (FGI2)

Participant 4: There are children books at home, but my son doesn't like to read.

Participant 5: Mostly, teachers read for him at school. (FGI3)

Participant 4: No (shaking her head). All my children don't like reading. (FGI4)

Participant 3: There is no reading at a kindergarten level. They don't have even a textbook, so how can they read. (FGI6)

Participant 2: We don't have a storybook at home and they don't usually read. (FGI7)

Participant 1: I used to buy one storybook for him. His sister read it to him before bed. Now it is damaged. So I don't want to buy those anymore because it is a waste of money. (FGI8)

In additions, caregivers also stated that they did not know the place to borrow children books, or there was no public library in the areas where they lived. While some caregivers reported there were some children books in their house, those books were not used for reading activities but mostly for drawing and painting. Furthermore, more than half of the participants stated that their children liked drawing more than reading. Thus, it was not clear whether they perceived that children did not like reading or reading was not a common practice at home.

It was surprising that when reading was mentioned, the caregivers thought about the type of academic textbooks that children use for learning in the class rather than picture books or fairy tales. The reasons behind this may be, first, caregivers might not receive information about the importance of reading at an early age. They might not know what to read, how to read, and when is the best time to start reading. Second, the variety of storybooks and prints are still limited in Lao society. One mother explained that it is difficult to find good updated books because all the books she knew has old information. These could be the reason why reading books are favored in many families.

Even though many caregivers thought that their child might be too young to read, only a few of them stated they were involved in reading bedtime stories. Specifically, caregivers who have a high degree of education explained the importance of reading literacy development. One mother provided information about the process of reading. She raised an example of different strategies that she applied when reading with her children according to their developmental stages:

> I know that many of us don't usually read, but we have to make reading a habit. Every year we buy new books for our children so they can read and improve their knowledge. My first daughter can read by herself now. But we still read for the second one. Now I start to let her pick her favorite books and read by herself.

> Whenever she doesn't know how to pronounce the words, she will ask us. Before, she tried to remember what we had read to her or just looked at the pictures and made up her own story. Now she tries to read word by word. (Participant 1, FGI1)

Respecting to the results, it was not clear how caregivers identified their role in children's literacy development and the types of literacy activities they are involved in with their children at home. However, the findings showed that caregivers with high education attainment were more involved in children's readiness preparation than their counterparts with a lower degree of education. It came to the conclusion that information on reading should be expanded for all families in order to support their readiness for school.

3) The Role of Family Members on School Readiness

Family plays the most important role in children's development. According to family systems theory, family function as an interactive unit, meaning that each member of the family has their own role in order to help and support each other toward specific goals. The finding generated from this study showed that many caregivers promoted school preparedness with the help of other family members. Specifically, parents who felt that they did not know how to help with children's homework or school tasks reported that they used the experience of older children to assist them. Parents said they

tend to ask their first children to do homework and play with the younger siblings:

> I used to teach my first child. Now she already knows how to read and write, so she takes this responsibility and teaches her younger siblings. Now I don't teach my kids anymore, because I already taught the first one then she has to teach her younger brothers and sisters. (Participant 2, FGI7)

Similarly to Hmong families, the first child normally has the responsibility of taking care of the housework and of young siblings. Even though this study focused on young children who were preparing for school, the Hmong caregivers mentioned that their first children's role is to help them with this task:

> Participant 1: When we wake up in the morning, my first daughter washes the dishes, clean the house, and prepare the bags for herself and her brothers to go to school.
>
> Participant 2: It's quite the same. I usually go to the farm early in the morning, so the kids prepare everything by themselves. In the morning, my first child cooks the rice and takes care of her siblings.
>
> Participant 3: My little son doesn't know to do anything except wakes up, eats breakfast, and goes to school. The first and second child will do the housework.
>
> Participant 4: Yeah same. My first daughter is already a teenager now, she is 14, and I already got the son in law (laugh). But the last child is now 7, and he still doesn't know anything. After waking up, he just goes to school. (FGI7)

Even though the eldest child plays the main role in helping their younger siblings for school in Hmong families, the mothers explained that they were responsible for taking care of children as well as the housework, while fathers were the final decision makers for the family. This kind of hierarchy was commonly found in families who lived in rural areas. On the other hand, this study found that fathers have been getting more involved in child duties, especially in the central areas. For example, one father said that he helped his wife with taking the children to school:

> Even though preparing children is mostly my wife's job, I take children to school in the morning and pick them up from school in the evening. (Participant 5, FGI4)

In some families with grandparents, taking care of children at home is their duty. They might not be prepared to be involved in the grandchildren's school and homework, but they usually look after their well-being:

> My grandson loves to stay with me. After waking up, I shower him and feed him. Every day I asked him the night before what would he like to eat for breakfast, then I prepared. After eating breakfast, his father takes him to school and his mother responds for his homework. (Participant 1, FGI2)

It is useful to consider what roles each member takes within the family. In this study, the first child took on the parental role of teaching their younger siblings, and the grandparents' duty was to take care of their grandchildren's

well-being, while mothers and fathers also helped each other to support their children. When family members have a clear understanding of their roles to promote children's school preparedness, they are more likely to fulfill their responsibilities.

VI. DISCUSSION

1. Conclusion

In the present study, I examined Lao caregivers' perceptions and involvement in their children's school readiness. The findings were drawn from eight focus group interviews with thirty-four caregivers. By applying the qualitative method, I came to understand that school readiness means different things to different groups of people (e.g., Lao caregivers, Hmong caregivers, and grandparents). Also, the participants' voices helped readers and educators understand more about school readiness in Lao context. The findings were categorized into three sections based on school readiness literature. The caregivers in this study perceived school readiness included not only ready children, but also parents, and school (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006; UNICEF, 2012), but they also identified ready teachers to be one of the important elements for the readiness practice.

Firstly, the data generated from this study indicated that readiness viewpoints were seen as a holistic approach to child development. To clarify, the caregivers discussed readiness for school in terms of children's physical and social-emotional skills, cognitive ability and language development, similar to the previous studies that have shown the most five significant

domains of development for young children (Kagan, Moore, & Bradekamp, 1995; La Paro & Pianta, 2000). These domains are noted as, physical health and well-being; literacy and language development; cognitive development; social and emotional development; and approach to learning. However, this study pointed out that the caregivers understood they could only prepare their children physically, and they relied on teachers to help their children with the academic and emotional abilities. It could be said that Lao caregivers might not accurately understand their role as the main supporter who could be involved in all dimensions of child development. Therefore, parenting education is needed in order to help them understand, so they could take a step forward to participate in their children's education.

The outcomes of the study also specified that the caregivers viewed the importance of teachers and schools to be another aspect of readiness. These perceptions aligned with those documented in Bronfenbrenner (1979), who assumed children's development happened within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the environment. The examples of this environment include the interaction with parents, teachers, community members, and peers. The findings in this study indicated that the caregivers typically relied on teachers and schools to make decisions on their children's readiness. By this result, it is important to specify that school readiness is not

one person's responsibility but it involves all individuals who are related to children. Specifically, parents and caregivers, who are known as the first teachers for their children (Fielding et al., 2004; Olsen & Fuller, 2011), and their perceptions and involvement play a crucial role in their child's academic achievement (Epstein, 2001). Thus, it is crucial to help caregivers understand school readiness as well as encourage them to believe that their actions can meaningfully support their children to prepare for not only the first school but also for their future education.

Secondly, with respect to school preparation, the caregivers from this study stated that they promoted readiness for their children by setting up a pattern of routines at home such as interacting with them on a daily basis and being supportive by helping them with homework. Additionally, the present study also implied that caregivers engaged in various types of activities at home which concurs with previous research that emphasized the importance of parental involvement in home activities for promoting school readiness (Bates et al., 1994). Moreover, the study also confirms the strong link between parents' readiness perceptions and their performance with their children (Stipek et al., 1992). To put it differently, the findings revealed that parents' interaction with their children were guided by their beliefs and personal experiences.

Another important finding of this study is the challenges faced by caregivers, especially the grandparents. As noted before, although this study focused mainly on parents participants, the extended family such as grandparents and relatives, also took part in the process. Particularly, for the parents who have to work far away from home, grandparents play significant roles in the nurturing their young grandchildren (Letiecq, Bailey, & Kurtz, 2008). The current study found that the grandparents were not prepared for their new role in helping their grandchildren to be ready for school because they did not have school experiences and also lacked the adequate knowledge and skills. To overcome this unique challenge that grandparents are facing, information sessions on the importance of children's learning may be provided for the group of grandparent-headed households. Also, it is important to encourage them to provide emotional support in order to help their grandchildren have a good relationship with school and learning.

To many caregivers of the present study, reading to children was not considered a daily routine that they should include in the home activity. The findings showed that different groups of caregivers had a different level of involvement in terms of reading. They could be interpreted that reading might be perceived as critical for those who experienced it in an academic setting. The previous study also showed that parents with high social status (e.g.,

educational attainment, occupation, and incomes) are more likely than their peers of lower status to provide the resources and skills needed to foster reading literacy in their children (Chen, Kong, Gao, & Mo, 2018). In order to stimulate language and reading development in young children, it is important to encourage families to often incorporate reading, story-telling, and engaging in conversations with their children in daily routines.

Moreover, the results of this study showed that Hmong caregivers were facing a unique challenge that was different from other Lao families, which is the way they use the common language. They expressed their concern for their children's ability to speak Lao language at school. While they tried to preserve their family's traditions, such as speaking Hmong with their children at home, they also wanted their children to learn Lao language. In addition, it was clear that when their needs were not met, they started to blame teachers and school for not doing their best to help their children's readiness for school. Moreover, they stated that it was considered unusual for them to teach Lao language to their children because they themselves were also not fluent. In order to help Hmong families and their children's school preparedness, this language barrier needs to be overcome. One way of doing this might be to introduce Lao language literacy classes for adults as well as

for children. In other words, we suggest that extra language preparation programs should be provided to ethnic minority children and their families.

2. Limitations and Contribution

There were several limitations noted in the present study that could be addressed in future research. The first one is related to the tool used for obtaining data. Although focus group interview is identified to be beneficial for researchers to gain participants' opinions about a particular topic and also provide an interactive environment where participants feel comfortable to discuss with each other, this methodology requires participants to participate at the same time. Specifically, in this study, it was found that this tool was helpful for only a few certain areas. For instance, it was more difficult to gather participants in urban areas because guardians mostly had a full-time job. Therefore, future research in these areas should be conducted by using different tools (e.g., individual interviews, face-to-face interviews). Secondly, the intention of the current study is to gain an in-depth understanding of caregivers' views on school readiness in Lao PDR. In order to understand the holistic approach of school readiness and to bridge the gap between home and school, future studies might consider involving the voice of all individuals who are related to children such as parents, teachers and school leaders.

Despite these limitations, this study helps broaden the understanding of school readiness in Lao PDR, which also adds to the limited amount of research studying Lao caregivers' perceptions of their children's school readiness. In addition, the present study also takes an important step forward in promoting caregivers' voices as their role is just as important for preparing their child for school. Finding from this study might be helpful for teachers and early childhood policymakers who are working toward school readiness practice. In reference to the research findings, the need for parenting education is evident in order to help Lao caregivers understand the importance of readiness, so they can fully participate in their children's education. To put it another way, caregivers need to know what they could do to help teachers and school, and more importantly, they also need to know their role in raising their children to be competent adults of Lao PDR in the future.

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APPENDIX

Question guide for Focus Group Interview

Objectives: To get information about school readiness's perceptions and the ways to promote school readiness with Lao families in Lao PDR.

I. Introduction

The moderator introduces him/herself and the objectives of the focus group discussion:

…….*"Hello I am Savivanh Vongxaiya, a Master student majoring in child development and Family Study from Seoul National University. I am currently conducting a qualitative research in your community for my dissertation. This information will help me to assess how parents perceive and involve in their child's early school preparedness. All of information from this interview will be treated confidentially. I will use voice recorders in order to help with the accuracy of data analysis. The interview will take about 1-2 hours. You are welcome to enjoy the refreshments provided throughout the meeting [motion to the water and snacks] and you can take a break any time if you want to. Remember that you can pass on any of these questions if you feel uncomfortable. In addition, you if you want to stop the interview, you can*

let me know at any time and we will stop the interview. Do you have any questions? Okay, let's begin"

Note: the volunteer team should record the following information prior to group discussion starts:

- Date
- Target group
- Name of the village
- Number of participants
- What ethnic groups? How many are there?
- What are their age?
- Marital status
- Level of education?
- Occupation?

Start focus group discussion:

Can you please tell me more about your child?

1) How many children do you have?
2) Do you have a child who is going to start school very soon?
   - Boy or girl?
   - Is he/she the first, second, third child?

   How old is he/she?

II. Child Education

1. Recently, has your child been attending pre-primary school?
2. What do you think of your child's attending pre-primary school?
3. In your opinion, are there any differences between boys' and girls' enrolling in pre-school or primary school? Can you explain more about that?
4. Why are some girls and boys not enrolled in pre-school or primary school?
5. Which level of education that you think your child should get at least (preschool, primary school….). Why?
6. Every parent has goals and dreams for their children. When you think about your

   child, what are your goals and dreams for him/her?

III. School Readiness

1. Tell me about your daily routine that you usually do with your child (for example, after waking up, afternoon, evening...)
2. What kind of activities that you and your child like to do together?
3. Are there any children books in your house?

- If no then ask: Do you know any places that there are books for children for example, local library, some neighborhood's house or relative's house…
- If yes: Do you read with your child?
    - If no then ask: Does your older child or other family members read to him/her?
    - If yes: when you read with your child do you:
        - Talk with your child about the alphabets, numbers and colors?
        - Talk with your child about the main idea of the stories or books?
        - Talk about the pictures in the story or book

4. While you are explaining or talking about something, does your child like to ask many questions?
5. Can your child recognize their own name from the written words?
    - If yes: where did he/she learn about that? (Who taught him/her?)
6. Can your child write or draw?
7. Does your child like to sing, dance?
8. Can you please tell me about your child's characteristics?
9. Does he/she like to play in a group or individually?

10. Who does he/she like to play with? What do they play together?
11. Does he/she feel comfortable around new people?
12. Is there another setting, besides the home, where your child spends a lot of time?
13. Except you, who are some of the other people that help your child's early learning?
14. Please choose the pictures that that represent what you would provide your child to stimulate their learning at home (Legos, TV, phone, YouTube video, games, story books, picture books, toys, study materials….), other things else that is not appear in the pictures? What is it?
15. Have you ever talked to your child about school? What did you say? How did he/she respond?
16. What do you think children need to know and be able to do before entering school?
17. What do you expect your child to learn from school?
18. Describe your hopes when your child starts school? What are your fears or concerns?
19. Have you ever talked to other people or teachers in your village about how to help children learn or how to prepare them for school?

- Can you please explain in detail about what you talked?

20. How you and your community work together to support children's learning?

IV. Suggestions

1. In your opinion, what are the most important things that need to be done to improve school readiness in Lao PDR in the future?
2. What are your recommendations for other parents who are also preparing or will prepare their child for school?

초록

양육자가 학교준비에 대해 가지는 인식과 태도는 자녀가 초등학교에 들어가기 전을 어떻게 준비시키는지에 영향을 준다. 그러나 초등학교 저학년의 경우 높은 유급율과 자퇴율을 보이는 라오스에서 양육자들이 자녀의 학교준비에 대한 자신의 역할을 어떻게 인지하는지에 대해서는 알려진 바가 없다. 따라서 이 연구는 질적 분석을 통해 라오스의 가족 맥락에서 학교준비를 연구하는 것에 목적을 두고 있다. 이 연구의 연구문제는 다음과 같다.

1. 라오스 양육자의 인식에 근거하여 그들에게 학교준비란 무엇을 의미하는가?

2. 라오스 양육자는 어떻게 자녀의 학교준비 향상을 도모하는가?

이 연구를 위해서, 자녀의 첫 번째 학교를 위한 준비를 경험했던 양육자들 총 34명이 8개의 포커스 그룹 인터뷰에 참여하였다. 이 연구의 결과는 선행연구에서 나타난 학교준비의 세 가지 측면에 근거하여 세 개의 주제로 구분될 수 있다. 또한 양육자들의 이야기를 통해서 다음과 같은 부제들이 만들어졌다: (1) 아동의 준비: 신체적, 사회-정서적, 인지적 준비가 되어있는 아동이 학교에 대한 준비가 되었다는 것; (2) 학교의 준비: 학교준비는 양육자 본인이 아닌 학교와 교사의 영향을 받는다는 생각에서 비롯된 양육자들의 기대감과 학교준비 간의 부조화; (3) 가족의 준비: 각

포커스 그룹의 양육자들은 일상생활 속에서 자녀에 대한 개입의 정도가 다르다는 것

이 연구의 결과는 라오스의 교사, 아동 전문가, 정책 전문가들이 다른 그룹을 위한 어린 아이들의 학교준비에 대한 그들의 이해를 도우면서 구체적인 양육 프로그램을 설계하는 데 시사점을 줄 수 있다. 후속 연구로 학교준비와 관련하여 교사, 학교장, 정책입안자에 특히 집중하기를 제언하는 바이다.

주요어: 학교준비, 양육자, 인식, 개입, 어린이집, 라오스 가족

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